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## Critical Closeness, Intimate Distance: Encounters in the *Love Art Laboratory*

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### *The slippery tingle of your lips*

Audiences were continually invited to get up 'close and personal' with Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens over the course of their seven-year *Love Art Laboratory* project (2005-11). Staging their intimate coupledness as public spectacle was the starting point for Sprinkle and Stephens and this autobiographical motif has endured as they have continued to promote their 'ecosexual' brand of environmental politics, within and beyond the confines of the initial project.

*Extreme Kiss* (fig.1) was an early performance in the project featuring marathon kissing sessions in various locations. Their attentive loving focus on each other certainly offers a close look at the intimate admixture of Annie and Beth's salivary juices, permitting me, as I watch the ten minute video excerpt at their online depository, *loveartlab*, to imagine the feel and taste of those distended tongues and masticating lips.<sup>1</sup> The live versions went on for far longer: the pair sustained 3 to 4 hours non-stop in May 2005 at the opening of *Private vs Public* in San Francisco, for example.<sup>2</sup> The video allows me to focus on the cycles of tonguing, pecking, licking, nibbling that the two unstintingly performed. They alternate between lingering passages of mouths wide open, and lips tightly pursed like punctuation points, both utterly concentrated on each other, yet playing to the gallery too. They surely knew that the affects circulating my witness – any witness - to such a scene were neither certain nor guaranteed. I'm aware that a viewer is as likely to be switched off as turned on by such an invitation to gawp at these two making out, perhaps seeing the performance as a kind of confrontation or challenge. In the context of Sprinkle's breast cancer diagnosis and treatment early on in the project, the couple's bald heads become an obvious signifier, and the work can be seen as a challenge, or riposte to the forces that were conspiring to keep them apart, whether pathological or political. The performance, in its live and recorded iterations was not only a defiant response to the disease that threatened Sprinkle's life, and their life together, but also a statement of the resilience of queer love, at that time denied

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<sup>1</sup> First shown at an installation of the pair's work at *Digital Love*, M'ARS Centre of Contemporary Art, Moscow, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Curated by Tina Butcher at the Artists' Television Access Gallery.

legal sanction in the U.S. through gay marriage, one of the motivating factors in establishing the *Love Art Laboratory*. In this respect, *Extreme Kiss* works on the borders of empathic intimacy, political arousal and a kind of abjection. The intimacy of the kiss is readily identifiable, but the work keeps me on the edge of horrified fascination – going in for the tonguing, and pulling out to get a more distanced perspective. Their ‘Chemo-Fashion’ shaved heads, departing from their more typical butch-femme self-presentation, exacerbate the strangeness of a prolonged viewing, making them, if not personally unrecognisable, then formally blank, even de-gendered, but I can’t decide if this makes them weirdly generic, or far too disconcertingly specific. Perhaps it allows the viewer to project and identify more readily. Yet, they might also appear too alien, too unlike anything familiar, too abject to let me (or you) in.

I don’t know in advance what the encounter with Annie and Beth’s love is going to feel like, even if I think I do, so I want to be open to what intimacy, however played, might do to the *critical* encounter, and what it gives us access to. The publicly staged context might represent their intimate interaction, but it does not as a result provide me with personal revelation. The personal doesn’t so much inhere in their relation to one another as in the encounter that *I*, (or of course *you*), might have with their intimate face-sucking display. By intertwining the meanings of closeness that generically adhere to conventions of intimacy, with the (scholarly) habits of critical distancing, it might be possible to hold open a work’s complexities and how one understands them. I did not see the live version of the *Extreme Kiss* performance, and regretfully I missed an opportunity to join the couple at a public kiss-in on the Kings Road outside the Chelsea Theatre in London.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps that’s why I have so vividly replayed my imagined participation; why I can almost feel my own mouth moving over theirs, the slippery tingle in my lips as I watch, perhaps in queer identification with their lesbian kiss. I fictively re-make the scene for myself and in doing so suggest a way for another reader to inhabit it – or at least to recognise it as an ongoing encounter, no matter whether they are tuned to its erotics, puzzled by its exhibitionism, or bored by its length.

Intimacy as it figures in this project, (and extended to you in my writerly encounter with it), is not centrally about physical, geographical, or bodily proximity: I didn’t have to be there to get close to Annie and Beth. It is instead an orchestrated psychological and emotional affair, familiar to those of us who get into the heads of fictitious characters, to those of us who take up the countless invitations – frequently made, but not always fully consensual - to peer in on the lives, the emotions, the bodies, of others across numerous genres and across many

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Extreme Kissing: The Pleasure, Politics and Art of the Kiss’ was a workshop and ‘kiss-in’ conducted during the run of their theatre show, *EXPOSED: Experiments in Love, Sex, Death and Art*, at the Chelsea Theatre, London. The show ran from 19-22 September 2007.

forms of practice. In this respect intimacy is not coterminous with my personal closeness. Rather, their use of the genre of intimate display becomes a route to something apparently authentic and truthful about their relationship not only to one another, but also to wider and more immediate political conditions. The autobiographical performance of intimacy's well-known signifiers might lead us to wonder what they are revealing about their personal investments in their relationship with each other, as they kiss for prolonged durations. We might think we are getting privileged insight as their tongues intertwine, but this may be only so much affective projection on our part. After all, intimacy's conventions dramatise the autobiographical 'I' to signify the interiority of the self, and provide credulous access to those 'innermost' feelings.

The longer I watch, the more I conjecture, the more I move between identification and desiring fantasy. I change position as my stay with *Extreme Kiss* allows me to progress through a spectrum of affects, from intrigue to fascinated enjoyment. The invitation is to suppress difference in an intimate identification so that I become like them, as they have become like each other. But their otherness is retained as I don't want to close that gap between myself and them. Or rather, I find that I can't close it, because shame at my intimate moment with them forces a distance, as I imagine others watching my voyeurism. Even though their ambiguously gendered appearance and bald exhibitionism queers any normative expectations of the gaze, I feel I must avow my own queer gaze (or rather, disavow a heterosexual presumption). The parallelism of distance and closeness works out into an 'intimate criticism', that oscillates between the work and my contingent relationship with it.

In order to explore this I will go on to look at moments or episodes in the project that triggered a rethinking of the binaristic relationship between closeness and distance in conventions of critical judgement. Where I am folded into an embrace with the work that disallows the habitual separation of the two modalities. I am instead caught between the terms in a critically ambivalent gesture that draws out from certain scenes to *enact* a movement between closeness and distance in my encounter, rather than impose it upon them.

The critical and emotional ambiguities of Annie and Beth's project, ambiguities that constitute what intimacy often feels like, provide me with an example for my own approach. They give me permission in my writing to shuck off critical certainty and play with the drive to resolve contradictions and ambivalences, such as those pertaining to marriage, or romantic

love, and the couple form.<sup>4</sup> When I gave an early, very different version of this text as a paper for Emma Talbot and Joanne Morra's *Intimacy Unguarded* symposium I had an agonising tension headache, similar to the relentless migraines I used to get as a child that were emetic and debilitating. I battled through it, but only later was I able to draw a lesson from it: that my anxiety stemmed from critical ambivalence and indecision, my inability to resolve conflicting thoughts and feelings about Sprinkle and Stephens' work into a coherent analysis of my own. I have had these critical 'headaches' before – like an inflammation of the membranes of my brain and its critical training. My inability to pull all the work's ambiguities and contradictions together made me tense and nervous, unequal to the task of critical resolution. Uncertainty for some – myself included – produces discomfort and unease. But if anxiety is 'the affective copy of ambivalence' as Lauren Berlant (2008, 13) compellingly claims, maybe accepting indecision and contradiction is something Annie and Beth can teach me – to reject a critical habit that strives to plug gaps, cover over holes in the argument in favour of letting it all hang out, just as Annie and Beth are wont to do. This also allows me to personalise my critical gesture by performing it, as well as to reflect upon the risks entailed in such a move – especially the risk of losing critical coherence. If the affect of ambivalence is an anxious feeling it's also a mobile one that allows me to move between the many facets of the project and to suggest the myriad possibilities of an emotional hermeneutics for the viewer, the writer, and hopefully for the reader too. This mobility is invoked in the episodic structure of the essay, in which each selected moment of the *Love Art Lab* project becomes an articulation of how intimate closeness and critical distance swap places and intertwine.

### ***We promise to listen to you...massage you...hang with you***

Arguably the work started out in more or less explicitly autobiographical vein: they met, fell in love, their two worlds came together. 'What happens when former porn star, sexologist and performance artist Annie Sprinkle falls madly in love with experimental artist, professor and sexy dyke playboy Elizabeth Stephens?' declared the publicity for the *Love Art Lab* project: the stuff of TV dramatisation, and lurid tabloid exposé. *Love Art Laboratory* was itself a 7-year 'Living Art' project, running from the end of 2004 until 2011, modelled on performance artist Linda Montano's chakra-based cycles of life as art. Montano, Sprinkle's mentor since their first collaborations in the 1980s, is known for her dedication to the principle that art and life become indistinguishable. On this basis, the collaboration foregrounded the exploration

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<sup>4</sup> My previous writing on the work of performance maker, Adrian Howells has explored the critical value of ambivalence. See Jon Cairns (2012, 2016).

and celebration of Sprinkle's and Stephens' love, not only for one another, but also, from its mid-point, for the environment. From the outset it broadened out the familiar codes of generic autobiographical narrative into an interconnected round of performances, workshops, exhibitions, symposia, street-level interventions, queer and eco-activism, video installation, lectures, drawings and print. Indeed, through an explicit theatricalisation of their intimate relationship they exceeded the conventional 'autobiographical pact' with their audience members by drawing them in as participants.<sup>5</sup>

I first encountered *Love Art Lab* when the London run of *EXPOSED* broadly introduced the entire project to a British audience. Through anecdote, audience participation, and on-stage re-enactments of key moments in their relationship up to that point, they simultaneously recounted and performed their love for each other. They playfully (re)-enacted their sexual attraction to one another on a huge bed, while a slide show played behind them, detailing their previous lives and work. As the production progressed, their own life-stories became a show which both dramatised various events they'd been through together, and was also one of those events itself, unfolding in front of us and with our invited participation, as when we were asked to join them to be fed jelly and later to enter into discussion and offer our thoughts on gay marriage.

The marriage question was in earnest, given that the lynchpin of *Love Art Lab* was the regular staging of 'performance art weddings'. Sprinkle and Stephens certainly wed with gusto, with one annually since the inaugural celebration in December 2004, with at least two per year from 2008, and four in the final White/Silver year of 2011 (fourteen ceremonies by the end of the project).<sup>6</sup> Each year was themed according to the ascending order of the 7 chakras, beginning with the perineum, up through the belly and heart, to the crown, each denoted by a colour and a series of associated values. The Chelsea production drew me into the affective landscape of the project, couched in terms of a celebration of public togetherness – an upbeat reparative response to right-wing politics and neoliberal retrenchment. The couple struck out against pro-war sentiment, and the 'War on Terror', as well as the rising tide of homophobia (centred on anti-gay marriage legislation in the US at that time, particularly in their home state of California, where they could not legally marry); and the general air of political and social cynicism. Their Orange wedding vows in 2006 appealed to 'our community' – to whom they made a series of promises: to 'see you, listen to you...massage you...hang with you...persist with you...end the war with you'. Everything, no

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Linda Haverty Rugg (1997) on Philippe Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact', which constitutes the contract between the writer and the reader that equates the name of the author with the protagonist. See also Paul John Eakin (2008) on the rule-governed nature of autobiographical discourse (partic. pp.31-51)

<sup>6</sup> This crucial aspect of *Love Art Lab* has continued since the formal end of the initial cycle, with further weddings since. There have been 18 to date.

matter how shattering or horrendous, anger-inducing or disappointing, was responded to with humour, laughter, pleasure, eroticism, and love. Direct address and a participatory zeal aimed to forge their public into a community of friends, through an emotional appeal to share how they felt about what was happening in the world. Their espousal of the marriage form and its overwhelmingly celebratory narrative was premised on holding it close, rather than at a critical distance, and instead models a kind of *critical closeness* that I want to learn from.

### ***Pushing up your breasts***

To this extent, the project was about allowing others not only to witness their attachment to one another, but also to let them share in their love. *Cuddle* (fig.2), first performed at the Femina Potens Gallery in San Francisco in 2005 (The Red Year, for security and survival), literally got their love-witnesses into bed with them, sandwiched between them, in a wilful act of soothing, comfort and fun. This may have been to make the political troubles that motivated the project feel momentarily bearable, live-able through, even if that meant temporarily bracketing off wider problems beyond the artwork, to focus instead on the angle of snuggle, negotiating your position next to those other bodies, having a titter at the silliness of it, or taking the opportunity for a snooze. Lauren Berlant suggests in *Cruel Optimism*, that attachment to the ‘ongoingness’ of the conditions that help keep you where you are – in marriage (or not), in coupledness (or not), in the stresses and strains of the family (or not), or more prosaically, in bed with familiar bodies (or not) – allows you to cope, to keep from sinking, despairing. Of course this is not the same as having the duvet pulled over your head to keep the world out... But it does, for Berlant, problematise how normative social agency relates to change. In her argument, such agency prevents you from going beyond the parameters of what feels socially possible in your life, life already committed to replicating the conditions that keep it going, caught up in responding to its daily demands. What then is possible, if the socially necessary routines and habits to ensure comfort, happiness, the feel of being ok, never admit room for political challenge? Arguably Sprinkle and Stephens foreground their coping strategies as a form of agency, but one that is not necessarily explicitly political, couched as it is in the popular languages of love, sentimental romance, sexual humour and innuendo – a range of familiar rhetorics, queerly recontextualised.

Back on the stage of *EXPOSED* (fig.3), after the stories of Sprinkle and Stephens’ respective trajectories, the romantic run-down of how they met, and their attraction to one another, a grimmer note sounded. Sprinkle’s still recent breast cancer was suddenly, unpredictably, brought into the performance. To a slide show of her operation, Sprinkle whipped off her wig

to reveal close cropped hair <sup>7</sup> - she and Stephens mimed their horror and anxiety at this incursion into their still budding relationship. But there was radical – perhaps forced - lightness too, as Sprinkle alternated her performance of shock, grief and incomprehension with her stock-in-trade titillatory poses. She suggestively pushed up her breasts and pouted to us, before going back to bewilderment as her habitual survival strategies didn't quite work, or at least got severely tested.

Sprinkle's performance of her response to her diagnosis, lurching between both extremes at once in this brief emotional vignette, conveyed better than elaborate autobiographical description the overwhelming feel of that bad news. The dilemma of how to reconstruct and re-present something difficult and uncomfortable seemed to be strikingly modelled by Sprinkle's ambivalent gesturing in that moment. In its small but effective way, this act retrospectively mirrored for me the task of writing to achieve the complex affect of a given moment. I repeatedly see myself reflected in that face and the hideously unsettling ambivalence about how to proceed in the absence of critical or political certainty. Of course, for Sprinkle, it was never about *whether* to proceed, but more like an abyssal pause - a moment of gathering herself up to put the familiar 'face' back on, and thrust her bust back out. I entertain the idea that her facing towards Stephens, pushing her face into her lover's, as in the melding of *Extreme Kiss*, became her way of putting a new hybrid face to the world, one joined to Beth's and her environmentalism. Indeed they both soon emerged as ecosexuals, with Sprinkle adopting Stephens' causes as her own, and vice versa.

In relation to the disorientating doubt symbolically theatricalised in the stage show, 'Chemo-Fashion' represented the default 'happy', a more conventional 'up' to cope with the trials of treatment and its toxic side-effects. In this respect, they relied on what resources they had at their disposal to deal with Sprinkle's cancer. They used tacky fabrics, colourful costumes and humour to restore a positivity left hanging in the balance, and to allow Sprinkle to re-occupy her erstwhile role as therapist-teacher-entertainer, helping fellow patients getting chemotherapy alongside her. This is a good example of the tone of the project overall – the challenges and difficulties that life throws up, as with the trauma of cancer, were filtered through a positive affective landscape – it's by turns joyous, nurturing, comic, and erotic as 'Hairotica', and the 'Breast Cancer Ballet' attest. But the image of Sprinkle in the agonising throes of utter confusion about how to respond has indelibly impressed itself upon me. I have returned again and again in my thoughts about *Love Art Lab* to this fleeting yet incredibly strong image, making it an emblem of the project – in part because it is the classic Benjaminian 'dialectical image'. Rebecca Schneider (2001) uses this formulation to

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<sup>7</sup> In the early productions of *EXPOSED* in 2006, Sprinkle was completely bald, as was Stephens, who shaved her hair in support as part of their 'Hairotica' piece.



effectively describe Sprinkle's knowingly naïve performance persona, in which the figurative device by which an illusion is created is simultaneously revealed as a working ideological construct, so we are momentarily deceived and undeceived by the same routine. But it is also something else – I keep coming back to those faces of hers, in part because they take me back to the show itself, synecdochal glimpses that help me to reconstruct the rest. But maybe this scene of uncertain switching has become so imbued with significance for me because it sums up my own critical uncertainty – or at least the uncertainty of critique, in a time when the 'dialectical image' seems strangely assimilated into the popular image generally.

### ***Feeling your archive***

Annie and Beth have pulled me intimately close for a cuddle or a kiss, zoomed out with the formalities of autobiographical narrative, and back in again, intertwining closeness and distance through the conventions of archiving and live art. Eroticised intimacies mix with self-conscious remove and reflection in a critical duet that sees them switch places and meld. What may be a video document or a series of photographic stills provides access to a vivid imagining of the real kiss, the actual embrace, while the live performance rehearses a story already told, anticipates a recognisable representation (the kiss as lovers' seal, the hug as formula image of togetherness).

The autobiographical, insofar as it is generative of their project and its stories overall, is used as a lure, a moment of contact, of (dis)identification, of (mis)recognition, rather than an end in itself. Sprinkle and Stephens have tended to use autobiography as a starting point or pretext to articulate or enable other concerns, and have done so in a way that avoids or complicates the signed and sealed authorial account, especially given the constant re-viewing and re-enactment of their histories in the context of dialogue, interviews, talks and audience participation. The project fostered close rapport, contact and actual collaboration with its audience-participants, but also kept them at a distance in an intriguing push and pull that is at the heart of public intimacy more widely. They did this variously through confessional and autobiographical rhetorics, the use of their bodies in performance, as well as across a familiar repertoire of archival forms of self-presentation, including photography, video, storytelling, installation, gallery exhibition, and writing.

Across both archival and live forms, the audience was allowed to feel the validity of *the encounter*, however accessed, as the important thing. Their adoption of Montano's model of

life as art allowed them to play with the stricter conventions of autobiography.<sup>8</sup> Instead of privileging archive and memory, this 'living' structure enabled a kind of moment-to-moment self-fashioning, a self-scripting that kept open what *might* happen (rather than charting only what had already happened).<sup>9</sup> Rather than historical recounting, it became a future-orientated project that was about preparing, planning the next public declaration of Annie and Beth's life together and love for each other, exemplified by the increasingly expanded series of weddings.

But *Love Art Lab* is of course now extant as *an archive*, primarily as a web-site, built up and updated throughout the life of the project. Indeed, the ongoing documentary aspect of the performance was integral to the work as a whole as it developed in real time. Their performances were equally works of record, as well as works of changeable *mood*, perhaps exemplified by the sounds of Annie and Beth moaning 'We love you!' when you clicked the homepage button, in an earlier incarnation of their website (which, sadly, seems to have been discontinued). So there was a backwards and forwards movement of the autobiographical performance which left an archival trail, in tandem with the 'living art' character of the project which made itself up as it went along, but also involved a constant re-telling and tampering with the story, a different version each time they played the stage, gave an interview, or made an exhibition. Indeed, Sprinkle is a true veteran of autobiographical (re-)staging, through her various performances, videos, interviews and publications that tell the stories of her career – they navigate and narrate but also elaborate and fabulate a sexual trajectory that I won't recount here, as it's widely available to those who are interested e.g., in *Post-Porn Modernist* (1991); *Annie Sprinkle's Herstory of Porn* (1999), *Hardcore from the Heart* (2001).

The weddings performed as part of *Love Art Laboratory* continued this tradition of dual work. This meant encapsulating the narrative of Sprinkle and Stephens' story as a couple by formalising it in the rhetoric of 'marriage' as record, as archivable document, as well as acting it out in exuberant living witness to a developing relationship. In this respect, they exploited the *affective* work of the autobiographical mode, as a way to activate emotionality in the space between the political and the personal. Indeed the work of *feeling* is central to the political for Sprinkle and Stephens in their conscious reactivation of 'the old adage'

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Montano's practice is a more intensely disciplined meditative practice, but focuses on the routine repetition and organisation of daily life, mediated through the colours representing the chakras (dictating what she wore). In the first of her ongoing cycles of *7 Years of Living Art*, from 1984-1991, she met once a month in the window of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York with her audience for art/life counselling.

<sup>9</sup> See Josephine Machon (2013) on the emergence of specific, contingent events and experience within the duration of performance in a 'live and ongoing present' (44), and on the simultaneity of the 'live' and the 'lived'.

(*loveartlab*), as they describe the second-wave feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’. *Love Art Lab*, like Sprinkle’s previous practice, fostered and manipulated intimate affect in different ways – whether through *representations* of sex, love, sensuality, friendship and attachment, or through more direct forms of audience contact and interaction. Whatever the form, an embodied appeal is made to an affective spectrum that cuts across the live and the archival, the personal and the political, the public and the private. The generic conventions of intimacy are signified *par excellence* by ‘the wedding’ in so far as it traditionally codifies personal intimacy and puts the ‘private’ joining of two people into the public realm of legibility and witnessing. While Sprinkle and Stephens constantly strived to pull the audience into affective engagement with their own intimate union, to share their bridal joy, the weddings were also a collective spectacle, directed not only inwards, but outwards to the exterior space of queer politics and the terrain of the gay marriage debate. This is perhaps where the significance of my own witness comes in, as I write at an intimate distance, from the back of the wedding ceremony, alternating between the invitation to join with them at the level of fantasised identification – their love is my love – and my scepticism about accepting the invitation.

### ***Standing at the back: the personal, the political, and the matrimonial***

Annie and Beth’s weddings all followed the same basic format, borrowing largely from the default Western conventions of the ceremony, at which the couple arrived in costumed procession. Homilies were given, often in the form of a sermon delivered by the main officiant. This might be ‘Flux-priest’ Geoffrey Hendricks at the end of 2004 for the inauguration of the entire project with the Red year (at Collective Unconscious in New York); or Guillermo Gomez Peña acting as a ‘politico-shamanic Aztec High Priest’ in 2008, for the Green Wedding to the Earth in the redwood trees at Shakespeare’s Glen in Santa Cruz, California, where he gave a sermon in English, in Spanish and in tongues (fig.4). Beatriz Preciado, the queer and trans activist and writer, officiated at the 2009 Blue Wedding to the Sea in Venice, resplendent in blue bunny ears fixed to a Viking helmet; and the Reverend Billy delivered the sermon in quasi-evangelical tones with the backing of his choir from the Church of Life After Shopping at the 2010 Purple Wedding to the Moon in Altadena, Los Angeles.

Vows were taken before the rings were exchanged in front of an audience of witnesses and fellow celebrants: these included a roll-call of Californian contacts – as Sprinkle says, ‘we brought together all our friends’: queers, collaborators from Sprinkle’s history in the sex

industry, and her work in sexology and sex education (Veronica Vera, Candida Royale, Carol Queen), as well as peers and mentors from their art and performance careers and beyond, as the weddings travelled and extended their reach.<sup>10</sup>

This glorious motley band of collaborators put on an array of performances, whether in the form of body art, dance, street-style acts and circus turns, song, poetry and spoken-word, and gave the weddings their randomly carnivalesque, frequently sexual and joyously vulgar flavour. The hyperbolic positivity of the regular incarnations of the wedding form itself was redoubled by these performances. There was, a 'boylesque' 'fan-dance striptease' at Zagreb (2008), sensual gymnastics and a hula-hoop artiste in Ohio (purple 2010). The ring bearer rappelled out of the window and down the wall of Grove House in Oxford (Blue Wedding 2009); and a mermaid orgy at Venice (2009) was followed by Diana Pornoterrorista's aborted attempt to evacuate her 'Blue Squirting Fontana'.<sup>11</sup> At the Wedding to the Coal in Gijon, in Spain, dirt-blackened and paint- smeared performers declaimed their political and sexual commitment to nature (see *loveartlab*). The tone was often that of an ad hoc club cabaret, with much DIY display of queer sensuality and eroticism of all sexual shades. And, of course, far more nakedness and explicit body art than the average nuptial gathering, no matter the sexual orientation of the spouses. The couple's post vow kiss was – of course – full on at each rendition, rather than paying heed to the dialled-down public decorum of the regular wedding. Indeed the antics stretched to public oral sex, masturbation and, at the White Wedding to the Snow, the chilly insertion of icicles into the brides' vaginas (held in a deconsecrated church space, Saint Brigid's Centre for the Arts in Ottawa). That said, discretion seemed to dictate that the dancer in the Galbreath Chapel of Ohio University kept his purple knickers on while he jerked and contorted himself sympathetically to the thunderous sounds of Appalachian mountain-top removal mining.<sup>12</sup>

I revel in the queer signifiers, the hyper-eroticised performance tropes that seek to undermine the conservatism and solemnity of the occasion and its institutional consecration

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<sup>10</sup> e.g. Deborah Bright, Tania Bruguera, Luke Dixon, Cheryl Dunye, Geoffrey Hendricks, Del La Grace, Linda Montano. *loveartlab*.

<sup>11</sup> The fan-dancer was Jonathan McCloskey; the Oxford ringbearer, Clare Cochrane. John Paul Staszal & Erin Marie Paun, and Sarah Stolar respectively at Ohio. The mermaids were billed as Maggie Tapert, Bettina, Esther-Maria, and Daggi (*loveartlab*). See Diana Pornoterrorista's (Diana J. Torres) account at [pornoterrorismo.com](http://pornoterrorismo.com). She successfully emitted her fluids with a shower of piss in Barcelona for the Silver Wedding to the Rocks in 2011.

<sup>12</sup> The dancer was Michael J. Morris. Mountain top removal mining (MTR) is a destructive form of coal-mining currently used in the West Virginian Appalachians by Massey Energy Company. For details see *Goodbye Gauley Mountain: An Ecosensual Love Story* (2013).

of the couple form.<sup>13</sup> But in my capacity as a reluctant witness, I'm constantly looking for ways to find 'critique', to prise some distance between Annie and Beth and their apparently wholesale embrace of the wedding form. Of course, the repetition of the familiar routines – the vows, the speeches, the rings – was parodic, patterned on hetero-marriage in ways that were intentionally humorous. But those questions about gay marriage, put to the Chelsea Theatre audience I mentioned at the start, as well as my own ambivalence about the extension of that honourable estate to same-sex couples, kept re-surfacing. Of course there were moments of rescue: Sprinkle's old friend, the sexologist Barbara Carrellas, alleviated my critical difficulty when she turned up wearing a 'Death Before Marriage' t-shirt to the 2004 ceremony. After this first intervention, her manifesto, '10 Reasons Why Weddings Should be Abolished', was circulated at each subsequent event in order to register her official objections. Objections in fact became a regular comic feature of the weddings, as when a 'Disgruntled Heiress' (played by Naomi Pitcairn) claimed that the union with the Moon denied her inheritance, as she shouted down the assembly with "Freaks! Faggots! Lesbians! Everyone here is in direct violation of corporate values."<sup>14</sup> Different contexts also shifted the political resonance of the wedding. In addition to the performed objections that became an integral part of the weddings, there was external resistance. After public complaints about booking of the Farnsworth Amphitheatre, the Altadena event was cancelled by the local authorities on the grounds that it was not a 'real' wedding, before permission was reinstated. The Queer Zagreb ceremony took place in a much more embattled climate of homophobia and moral conservatism than Sprinkle and Stephens were used to.<sup>15</sup> The couple have themselves stated on more than one occasion that they are not pro-marriage but 'pro-equality, pro-human rights' (Kelley 2011). And, for the most part, Sprinkle and Stephens repeatedly staged the performativity of their commitment to one another in the wedding form without technically getting married: only one of the fourteen wedding events over the course of *Love Art Laboratory* was a legal marriage, in Calgary, Canada in 2007.

Without wanting to labour the point, the weddings, staged over and over in the course of the project, allow me to hark back to the fundamental metaphor of the performative as speech-act in J.L. Austin's famous use of the marriage declaration in *How To Do Things With Words*, itself repeatedly cited as *the* exemplar of saying as doing, the utterance enacting the very thing it speaks in the act of speaking it. Extrapolating from this, the reiteration and re-

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<sup>13</sup> By contrast, Bird la Bird's performance, *Up Your Art with The Society for Cutting up Couples* (2009), is more vehement in its comic critique of marriage and coupledness. Bird la Bird is the queer femme performance persona of Kath Noonan, co-founder of Bird Club, in London's east end.

<sup>14</sup> *loveartlab*. This was at the Purple Wedding to the Moon, Farnsworth Park Amphitheatre, Altadena, Los Angeles, October 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Information on the *Love Art Lab* website tells us that the organisers, including Mario Kovac, the festival director and wedding emcee, received a death threat. *loveartlab.ucsc.edu*

enactment of 'wedding' as a *verb* rather than a noun, turned it into an action in process rather than a statement of something fixed and objectively describable in the *Love Art Lab* project. The weddings were demonstrations of the ongoing performativity of Sprinkle and Stephens' relationship, even within the proximity of a more 'constative' marriage function that serves to describe and underwrite all couple union in the interests of a dominant sexual economy.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, as Judith Butler has taught us, the repetition of a familiar and established form can go either way. All specific acts of wedding repeat non-identically, opening up the possibility that the miming of hetero-norms in the queer or same-sex version might lead to displacing them.<sup>17</sup> Yet, arguably the routine repetition of the wedding form risks bolstering the normative status of marriage as an institution. That's the paradox of Sprinkle and Stephens' wedding performances – they undo the finality and closure of the definitive 'authorised' account of their loving union, keep it open and ongoing, and at the same time fix and archive it by hitching it (albeit as parody) to the necessarily familiar form.

Sprinkle could be forgiven for harbouring a desire for normality after a career on its sexual margins, and has often avowed this in interviews about the project.<sup>18</sup> However, these performance events, as I have intimated, were not weddings in any straightforwardly normative mould, neither fantasmatically nor materially. Rather *Love Art Lab* chimes with Elizabeth Freeman's (2011, 30) more nuanced perspective when she takes up a position 'against marriage and for weddings'. She writes that 'I wanted to take seriously people's pull toward normative symbology without assuming that those so drawn in were stupid or brainwashed, or did not wish for non-normative worlds even as they used seemingly banal materials to build them'. (Freeman 2011, 29).<sup>19</sup> In this respect, the *Love Art Lab* attached itself to the queer tradition of working in the interstices of mainstream culture and politics, as

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<sup>16</sup> The constative utterance – Austin's counterpart to the performative utterance – describes or reports what is external to the utterance itself. See Austin (1976). Laura Kipnis (2004, 41) complains that "even gays - once such paragons of unregulated sexuality, once so contemptuous of whitebread hetero lifestyles – are demanding state regulation too". She goes on to say that there is no need for compulsion when the demand for state regulation of all marriage is overwhelming. *Informal* compulsions work just as well in the context of extreme acquiescence and compliance with the norm that "social resources and privileges" are allocated on the basis of marital status.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Butler and Kotz (1992, 84-85), for a discussion of 'miming' and 'displacing' in relation to 'parodic repetition or reinscription' of the forms of power that you are implicated in even while you might explicitly oppose them.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g., Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, Athens, 23 October 2016 (Youtube). Sprinkle: '[W]e'd done sex for thirty-something years, so thought it was time for a change'.

<sup>19</sup> See Freeman's *The Wedding Complex* (2002) for an elaboration of this position.

a way to invent an alternative style of inhabiting it for the future, rather than totally refusing it.<sup>20</sup>

### ***How close is too close?***

My dubiousness about gay marriage puts me in touch with the interior fabric of the weddings themselves and what Freeman has called the 'productive non-equivalence between the institution of marriage and the ritual that supposedly represents and guarantees it' (2002, xv), a non-equivalence arguably dramatized by the sheer exuberance and multifariousness of the performances that takes them beyond mere mimicry of the form, and towards a bizarre nuptial obsession. Their emotional attachment to the wedding form enables a departure from it, or at least a tangent to its politics, in the production of diverse, sometimes harmonious, sometimes messy and uneven events.<sup>21</sup>

So, even when I think I can't stand the relentlessly happy tone, when I feel I've seen one too many semi-naked hoop artistes or heard too many kitschy paeans to love, I find myself responding to how Sprinkle and Stephens proffer a way of being touched which is warm and inclusive, alluring and seductive. And I want more... Or do I? This of course returns me to the unpredictable double-edge of intimacy, which can cut both ways, as I have already mentioned. This terrain, embracing the risks of intimacy, is familiar to Sprinkle. The idea that sometimes close might be too close - whether public or personal - has been the challenge of Sprinkle's work for a long time, ever since her *Public Cervix Announcement* disallowed a 'from a distance' appraisal, the safe pseudo-proximity of porn spectatorship's distance traduced in favour of closer-than-close inspection.<sup>22</sup> And it returns me to my old 'passional attachments', as Carla Freccero (2011, 23) calls them, when writing about the importance of avowing subjective closeness in the critical work of queer history. My own longstanding investment in Sprinkle, encompassing critical love and fan attachment, both facilitates and offsets my political ambivalence about what and how these performance works signify. The

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<sup>20</sup> I'm in sympathy with Munoz's (2009) critique of the negation of futurity in one vein of queer theory (best represented by Lee Edelman's *No Future*, and Leo Bersani's *Homos*). See pp. 11-12, 91-95.

<sup>21</sup> Lauren Berlant's concept of the 'juxtapolitical' is useful here, offering a criticality that is open to politics, but outside of it, refusing the political's "status as determining the real of power, agency, or experience". (2007, 267). See Michelle Tea's (2009) performance memoir of the Venice Wedding to the Sea in 2009 which captured some of its messy diversity, bringing to life the non-archived, behind-the-scenes moments, the off-kilter details, the lesbian gossip, the slippages and interruptions

<sup>22</sup> NB Rebecca Schneider explicitly foregrounds this in her foreword to *Hardcore from the Heart* (Cody 2001, vii-x). Many writers have responded to Sprinkle's challenges to critical habit. See e.g. Linda Williams (1993); Chris Straayer (1993) for sex-positive takes on her work. See also Terri Kapsalis (1997) for her commentary on Sprinkle's *Public Cervix Announcement*.

hyperbolic positivity of the regular incarnations of the wedding form itself was re-doubled by these performances – I struggle with it, but affective understandings are reactivated as I recall what draws me to Sprinkle's work. One of the enduringly appealing things about her has been her ability to veer between naïve cliché and sophisticated knowingness. 'Spread love to our communities and make the world a better and more beautiful place' proclaim the vows for the 2006 year of Sexuality and Creativity (*loveartlab*). That *love will see us through* is the typically Sprinkle sentiment invoked here, but more than sloppy platitude, it's also a demand, to which I must respond. This is a well-played duality and she has always worked this ambiguous tack, has always been 'theoretically sophisticated without appearing to be' as Gabrielle Cody avers (2001, 2).<sup>23</sup>

As a member of their intimate public, I'm a celebrant of these events, but this is an uneasy position to inhabit as a critical interlocutor with them. Jennifer Doyle (2013) writes astutely about the critical mistrust of overly emotional or sentimental attachments to politics because they are deemed to skew or 'pollute' critical thought and attention to what really matters. 'Critical thought, conversely, is assumed to displace emotion' (72), and she goes on to write that the 'intertwining of affect, systems of value and politics' in art creates a problem for a dispassionate model of critical distance (exemplified for her by *Artforum*, *October*, Hal Foster), which has a limited capacity to 'address the formal and political complexity of work that centres on the interface of the personal and political'.

Indeed the work of *Love Art Lab* provides a cue to revisit Nancy K. Miller's important notion of 'personal criticism', to account for its complexity, which intertwines the political and the affective out of all conventional recognition. For Miller, the work of critical interpretation risks an affective claim on the 'positional' through the intercession of the autobiographical 'I'. This becomes a means of putting the political and theoretical *position* of the critic into dialogue with the contingencies of her subjective and embodied place of writing, thus creating 'critical fluency' (Miller, 25) in scholarly work without merely resorting to the recognisable tropes and figures of autobiography as an established genre.

### ***Rolling my eyes and rolling in the dirt***

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<sup>23</sup> By contrast, in a moment of realism in one interview, Sprinkle referred to the fact that she and Stephens had committed themselves to the project very early on in their relationship, and that it could have gone wrong: either they might have split up with the end of the project or half way through they might have found that they 'couldn't stand each other', in Sprinkle's words (Kelley 2011). This was one of the few admissions of doubt, amidst the regulation Californian positivity that attended the project. It signalled the possibility of an alternative trajectory.



*Love Art Lab*'s play with the 'normative symbology' (as Elizabeth Freeman puts it) of romance, marriage, togetherness, monogamy all toy with the consolation of cliché. But if marriage and its normative behaviours and expectations might console by permitting access to the social resources and privileges conferred on the basis of marital status, as Kipnis (2004, 41) writes, then we might also feel a certain consolation in the rituals of resistance. Geoffrey Hendricks was an officiant and regular at a number of the weddings, always offering his trademark yogic headstand - his head connected with the dirt in a symbolic upturning of the normalised order of things. This reconnection with the earth goes to the heart of the environmental emphasis of the weddings from 2008, when the first ecosexual event was staged. But, authorised transgression notwithstanding, the carnivalesque exuberance of the project took it beyond the consoling solidarity of romantic love and the associated critical problems of being hooked into the conditions of one's own oppression, in Lauren Berlant's (2011) formulation, towards the more utopian possibilities suggested by Jose Esteban Munoz (2009).

If Sprinkle and Stephens started by literally getting into bed with their participant-collaborators, as they did in *Cuddle* early on in the project, the promiscuously open tenor of their project as a whole represented far more than a collective pulling of the duvet over their heads in an escapist or even place-holding normalcy. Maybe it would be fitting to say that *Love Art Lab* rolled around under that duvet, jumped up and down on the bed, and eventually lost the mattress altogether to writhe in the dirt, as the ecosexual moment of the project took hold.

If anything, the ecosexual turn shifted the *Love Art Lab* on to new terrain and invented an even more weirdly deviant version of the wedding form that began to unbind it from normativity in a way that critically parodic reiteration alone could not do. As the project developed, Stephens (2012, 62) explains, 'we kept orienting towards deviation instead of towards norms'. By the time the brides married the Moon in the Autumn of 2010, they were chanting their lunatic love, and confessed to being made 'a little crazy', as the *loveartlab* website attests. Stephens' environmental concerns, particularly focused on her native West Virginia, had converged with Sprinkle's porn and sexology work to spawn their ecosexual creed, and its related branch of study, sexecology.

In the Green year, signifying love and compassion via the heart chakra, they made their first vows to the Earth in Shakespeare Glen by ritualistically massaging her with their feet. The assembled guests and witnesses were encouraged to do so too, imagining that the Earth enjoyed their attentions. Sprinkle exhorted them to '[f]eel your consciousness in your feet...

Give the earth a little gratitude for all that she gives you', and the brides symbolically generated love by tapping their chests, to send the message down into the ground from their hearts: 'Earth, we vow to become your lover/With these steps/Let us reach your love' (*loveartlab*). The appeal to our erotic connectedness to the earth, to nature, to our immediate environment touches me, the humour and silliness of it reaching me, even as I quizzically raise my eyebrows at the unabashed hippy emotionality of the performance.

Stephens and Sprinkle have given playful, sometimes ridiculous, accounts of their ecosexual encounters, narrating alternative autobiographies as herstories of their sexual connections to the Earth. These moved from Stephens' experiences of 'skinny-dipping', her fascination with her grandfather's earthworm farm, to Sprinkle's recollections of skygasms and cloud ejaculations. As the ecosexual creed developed, they went on to not only marry each other once more, but the rocks, the sea, the earth, the coal, and the Moon. If the concept of marriage gets extended to a union with 'all entities and living beings' (Stephens and Sprinkle 2012, 66), both human and nonhuman, then marriage as an exclusive and therefore normalising institution becomes meaningless. The old clichés of love and togetherness were re-imagined, as sexual relations were extended to an erotic care for the Earth, and they extolled the sensual pleasures of a range of paraphilias, embracing a perverted relationship to what is hyper-familiar in our everyday surroundings. The *Dirty Sexecology* show opened up the project's matrimonial mantra to a new erotically charged commitment to ecological difference and diversity. They 'talked dirty' to plants, nuzzling and kissing the flowers planted at the top of the two hillocks of soil piled on the stage, their voices rising to a comic climax as they consummated their horticultural love. They ended up sitting naked on the dirt, before rolling around in mysophilic ecstasy (fig.5). The back-to-nature fetish for reconnecting to the dirt is one I understand and I relent as they expound the virtues of treating the Earth with 'kindness, respect and affection' (Stephens and Sprinkle, 2011). My psycho-sexual, emotional and spiritual health gets hooked up to the urgency of environmental politics, as Sprinkle and Stephens create a 'temporary fecund zone' (2012, 65) in the EcoSex phase of the project.<sup>24</sup> Personal intimacies with the politics of environmentalism are wildly, improbably, extended towards an all-inclusive, *de-personalising* communion with our animal, vegetable and mineral others, and echoed in the first ecosexual vows, in which the brides 'promise to love [the Earth] until death brings us closer together forever' (*loveartlab*). The dissolution of identity implied here was also enacted in their eventual burial in the soil that was heaped on the stage in *Dirty Sexecology*, by two assistants with shovels. Perhaps this was a new nuptial bed, one that invited everyone in, not only as a consecration to the Earth

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<sup>24</sup> For more on their ecosexual activism, see their documentary *Goodbye Gauley Mountain* (2013).

‘through this dirt that we will become’, but also as an appeal to an eco-community that is both politically *and sexually* embodied. The image is ambivalent, oscillating between ecological union with the earth and connubial bliss, and between those old bed-fellows, sex and death.

This performance, like the others, played with genres of the intimate encounter in absurdist symbolic display, but was neither reducible to ironic critique, nor legible simply as ‘political’. Art’s serious espousal of politics is re-cast as an espousal of love as politics, on the way re-kindling the hippy utopian ideal of the 1960s and early 1970s that love will solve political problems and supplant the need for conventional political engagement (love *instead of* politics). Though that era’s dream of ecological and communitarian oneness may have been judged a failure, the karmic genealogies of Sprinkle’s post-porn modernism, and how they have fed into her collaboration with Stephens, allow us to re-think the relationship between ‘personal enlightenment’ and collective action.<sup>25</sup> Collectivity is routed through the personal, bodily connection to the planet and thus to each other, as when witnesses join the brides’ ménage à trois with the sky. In *Love Art Lab*, the apparently easy appeal of the body and emotionality was deceptively simple as the audience was pulled into the complexity of the intimate encounter with others and asked to respond.

I might roll my eyes at the campy lameness of hills characterised as breasts, or groaningly smile that Bernal Hill, the scene of the project’s final gathering in San Francisco was billed as a ‘planetary clitoris’. Participants on an eco-sex walking tour might commune around a phallic tree, or chant that water gets them wet. But this comic-erotic cliché is part of a complex of images that also include the stark pictures of decapitated mountains in the Appalachians and of Annie’s breast surgically opened up to remove a malignant tumour.

So, I’m pulled from what feels like a conspiracy of knowing naïveté to unironic seriousness in an affective oscillation that wraps critique in a difficult intimacy that often makes me want to hold it at arms’ length, but also makes me appreciate the close-up view. *Love Art Lab* is expansive and mobile, exuberant and aberrant enough to accommodate my uncertainties. This enables me to fictively stage my personal encounter – to respond to an invitation to hug in close, to examine what is conventionally proffered as intimately available, and to get inside what is often distanced as a spectacle, as the weddings were for me. This does not end up with a straightforward inversion of distance and closeness and the respective workings of theoretical critique and emotional engagement, but something denser and more

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<sup>25</sup> See Freeman in *Time Binds* on how queer artists “min[e] the present for signs of undetonated energy from past revolutions.” (2010, xvi).

complex. It allows for an exploration of the criss-crossings of the affective and the critical, the bodily and the writerly. The contingent singularity of the encounter is potentially problematic. When do you stop describing the minutiae of your subjective interaction? What is worth sharing, and what simply superfluous? This in turn causes problems for theoretical coherence, for the easier valences of conventional argument, with its known points and predetermined routes, in favour of ambivalence, which moves between fixed valences. Indeed it stresses the affective movement between, amongst, like moving in the throng of an EcoSex tour, pulled numerous different ways: some dully familiar; some thrillingly silly; some tense and cringeworthy.

The work of the project, which continues in its new EcoSex variants, demands a much less reductive approach in order to address the complex ways it negotiates the personal and the political, across sexual politics and ecological issues. It demands that I keep my response open and fluid. Like Nancy Miller, who worried that the 'personal criticism' she advocated might *congeal* into a style or method, I'm nervous about thickening, coarsening, not being light and fluent enough. But maybe critical writing inevitably ebbs and flows, sometimes threatening to solidify. Congealing, after all, has connotations of something once fluid that is slowing and becoming gelatinous. While Annie and Beth teach me to keep my juices flowing, perhaps the abject tinge of coagulation is an unavoidable risk.

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